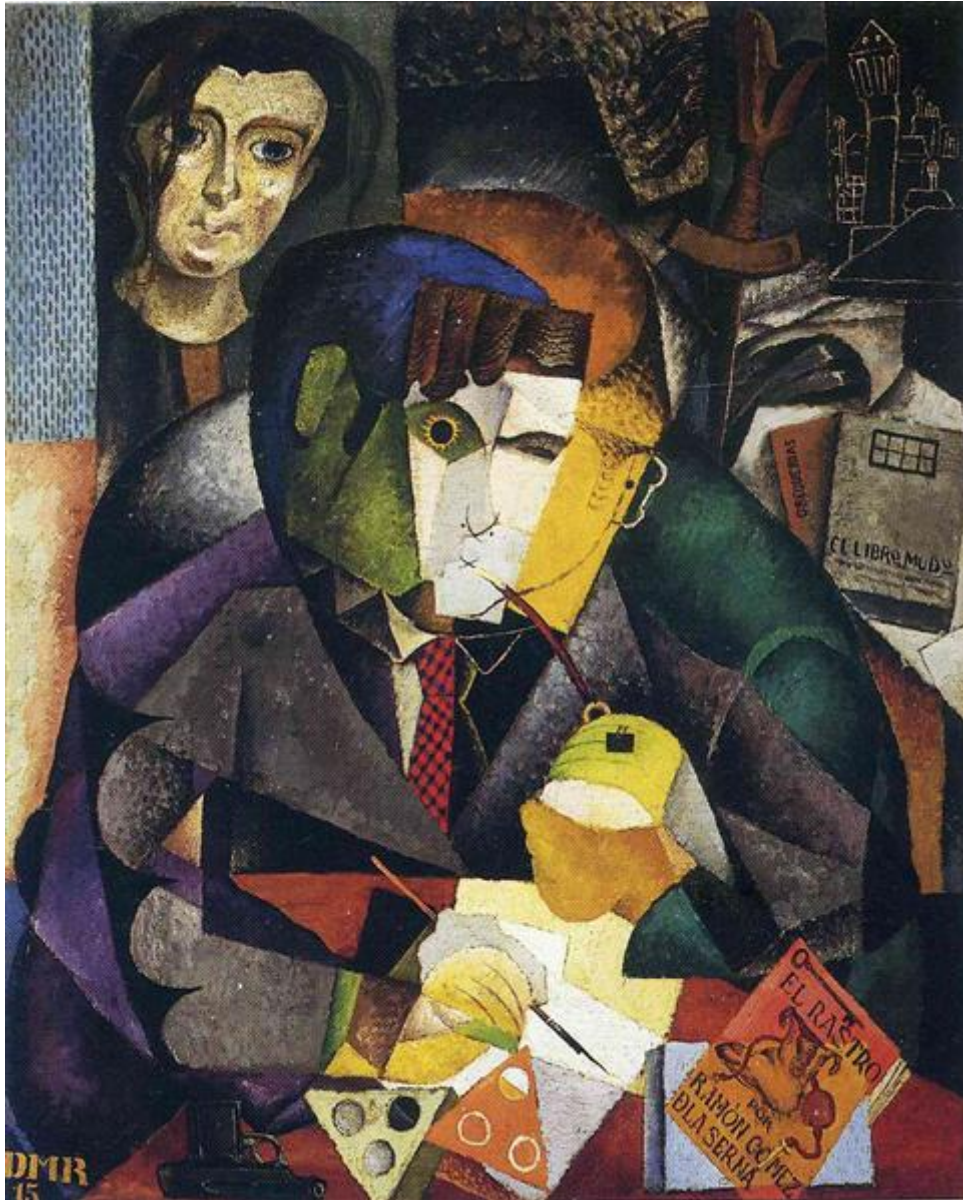


Kosti's Ramón

by Richard Kostelanetz (July 2016)

For my friend Tere (Gonzalez Minguez).



Portrait of Ramón Gomez de la Serna by Diego Rivera

Having produced appropriate book-art homages to Guillaume Apollinaire (known to his friends as Kostro) and to Nathanael West (commonly called Pep), among others, I'd like to do likewise by another modern writer to whom I am increasingly sympathetic—the Spaniard Ramón Gomez de la Serna (1887-1963), known even to strangers only as Ramón. More than a decade ago, with the assistance of an undergraduate intern named Martin Zotta, I produced *Simultaneous Translations*

(Cornerstone Press, Arnold, MO, 2008), in which Ramón's famously short, single-sentence texts appear directly above English translations typeset to be identical in horizontal length.

Born in Madrid in 1888, Ramón started publishing early, working in a variety of genres, assembling a coterie of like-minded young writers who met regularly in his native city, eventually publishing nearly 100 books. Invited to Buenos Aires in 1933, he stayed there for the remaining thirty years of his life, attracting a new group of enthusiastic admirers, including Jorge-Luis Borges, who incidentally ranked Ramón among the great modern writers, the Spanish equal of James Joyce. A half-century after his passing, Spanish publishers keep his works in print. In American literature the writer closest to him is probably E. E. Cummings, only a few years his junior. From EEC's more innovative texts, I once compiled *AnOther E. E. Cummings* (Liveright, 1998).

I first learned about Ramón in 1982 over lunch in Boston with Rudolfo Cardona, a BU professor who, after doing his doctorate on Ramón, produced the first book on him in English in 1957. Perhaps a decade later I came across an appreciative essay on Ramón by Miguel Gonzalez-Gerth, a popular professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who had also produced a book of miscellaneous translations of Ramón into English. What was most striking to me about this essay was my discovery that it inadvertently described my own severely minimal fiction better than anything else known to me.



Ramón Gomez de la Serna in 1931

Not until I read a later book in English about Ramón, Rita Mazzetti Gardiol's (1974), did I discover this sentence also applicable to me: "Because Ramón did not have the patience for a gradual building up of plot he preferred to write short plays, and even pantomimes, concentrating on the dramatic moment of truth, revelation, or decision that intrigued him." Bingo. I own a hardback copy of Ramón's *Automoribundia* (1948), which I treasure even if I cannot read it unassisted, if only for its title which I translate as "Autodeathography." I gather that much like my own four-volume *Autobiographies* (1980, 2004, 2006, 2016), composed independently of my known about his, *Automoribundia* is not a continuous pseudo-chronological narrative.

Reflecting Ramón's influence, this book has English versions of his *Greguerías* that I gleaned from various sources (including Google's Gremlins), often rewritten by me without referring to the original Spanish (which I can barely read), here intermixed with a few texts wholly mine that I think compliment his. Just as Ramón's *greguerías* are charmingly fanciful, highly original succinct observations, so might be a few of mine.

What is most remarkable about him (and perhaps me) is that, like other great aphorists, he's never obvious, even about common subjects, which is to say that Ramón gave himself permission to see differently and, once empowered, he didn't stop. Even while observing formal literary constraints, his mind seems unconstrained.

Sometimes I do what he did; other times, he writes me, especially after I've rewritten him to write like me, realizing the title of this book (*Kosti's Versions: French, Spanish, Hebrew*, to appear no later than 2018). Considering a multitude of worldly experiences, both Ramón and myself try to be light on our feet and swift with our fingers. When the pantheon of minimalist writers is constructed, may I please have a bust of me next to the one of him now in Madrid (recently visible in the [here](#)).

To help New English Review continue to publish informative and entertaining articles such as this one, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this article and want to read more by Richard Kostelanetz, please click [here](#).